SŪRAH 74

Al-Muddaththir

(Wrapped in Cloak)

Prologue

The information we expressed in the previous *sūrah*, The Enfolded One, about the occasion and timing of its revelation, also applies to this *sūrah*. Some reports suggest that it was the first to be revealed after *Sūrah* 96, The Germ Cell, while other reports suggest that it was revealed after the Islamic message went public, when the unbelievers began their persecution campaign against the believers in earnest.

Al-Bukhārī mentions a report by Yaḥyā ibn Abī Kathīr who says that he asked Abū Salamah ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān about the first Qur'ānic revelation. He answered that it was *Sūrah Al-Muddaththir*. "I told him that people said that it was *Sūrah* 96, beginning with '*Read in the name of your Lord.*' Abū Salamah said that he asked Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh about this and when Jābir replied that it was *al-Muddaththir*, he said to him what you had just said. Jābir replied that he only gave me what the Prophet himself said to his Companions: 'I went in seclusion at Ḥirā', and when I finished my time there, I came down. I heard a call, and I looked to my right and left but could see nothing. I came to Khadījah, saying: "Wrap me in a cloak and pour some cold water on me." They did so. I then received the revelation: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness.*"

Jābir reports that he heard the Prophet speaking about early revelations. He said: "While I was walking, I heard a voice coming from the sky. I lifted my eyes to the sky and I saw the angel who came to me when I was at Ḥirā' sitting on a chair in between the sky and the earth. I fell to the ground. Then I came hurriedly to my people, saying: 'Wrap me. Cover me.' I then received the revelation: '*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth.*' Then more revelations came in succession.

Commenting on this *ḥadīth*, Ibn Kathīr says in his commentary on the Qur'ān: "This is the accepted report. It means that revelations started before this, because of the Prophet saying, 'I saw the angel who came to me when I was at Ḥirā'.' That angel was obviously Gabriel who visited the Prophet saying: '*Read in the name of your Lord who has created – created man out of a clinging cell mass.*[1] *Read – for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.*' (96: 1–5) A lull in revelation then took place, and thereafter the angel again came to him. To reconcile the different reports we say that the first revelation the Prophet received after the lull was this *sūrah*."

A different report is given by al-Ṭabarānī on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās: "Al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah prepared food for a number of people from the Quraysh, and when they had finished their meal, he asked them what they thought of Muḥammad. Some said that he was a sorcerer, but others said he was not. Some said he was a soothsayer, but others denied this. Others still said he was a poet, but yet others objected. Then some said that what he said was mere 'sorcery handed down from olden times'. They all agreed to this. When the Prophet was informed of this, he felt very sad. He covered his head and wrapped himself up. God revealed to him: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience.*" (Verses 1–7)

1. This translation of this second verse of *Sūrah* 96 is more accurate than what I have given in Vol. XVIII, or what is variously given in other Qur'ānic translations. – Editor's note.

This report is almost identical to the one that refers to the preceding *sūrah*, The Enfolded One. Thus, we cannot be at all certain which of these two *sūrahs* preceded the other, or which was revealed on what occasion.

Yet a close look at the text of the *sūrah* suggests that its first seven verses were probably revealed in the very early days of the Islamic message. The same may be said of the first nine verses of *Sūrah* 73, The Enfolded One. Both openings aimed to prepare the Prophet for his great task, particularly when he needed to go public and address all the community with his message. He would then have to face strong opposition and compounded trouble that required such preparations. This would mean that the rest of the two *sūrahs* was revealed later, when the Prophet faced determined rejection and false accusations of fabricating his message.

Nevertheless, this does not exclude the other possibility that the openings of the two *sūrahs* were revealed together with what followed them. This so as to reply to the denial by the Quraysh and to comfort the Prophet who took their scheming to heart. Thus, the two *sūrahs* would be like *Sūrah* 68, The Pen, which is also discussed in this volume.

Be that as it may, the *sūrah* begins with an address from on high assigning a great mission to the Prophet, one that required he get out of bed and start striving: "*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning.*" (Verses 1–2) He is directed to prepare himself for his great task, taking the measures outlined to him in the *sūrah*: "*Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience.*" (Verses 3–7) Like the one in the preceding *sūrah*, this directive ends with the need to be patient.

The *sūrah* then includes a strong warning to those who deny the Day of Judgement, threatening them with a war directly waged by God, on the same lines as the warning given in the preceding *sūrah*: "*When the trumpet is sounded that will be a day of anguish, far from easy for the unbelievers. Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (Verses 8–17)

The *sūrah* makes special mention of this person who was particularly hostile to the Islamic message, but without naming him. It paints an image of his scheming against Islam, in the same way as we have seen in *Sūrah* 68. It may be that both *sūrahs* talk of the same person, said to be al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, but more of this later. The *sūrah* mentions the reason for God's warning to this person: "*He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!'*" (Verses 18–25) The *sūrah* then specifies his destiny: "*I will cast him into the scorching fire. Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; it appears before mankind, guarded by nineteen.*" (Verses 26–30)

The mention of the '*scorching fire*' and the nineteen guards in charge of it invited much questioning from the unbelievers who also added to it ridicule and sarcastic remarks, and raised doubts among those who were not firm in faith. The *sūrah* outlines God's wisdom in mentioning this number, giving us a glimpse of the world beyond our perception and the fact that knowledge of this world is God's own preserve. This glimpse sheds light on some aspects of the Islamic concept of this world beyond: "*We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind.*" (Verse 31)

The whole question of hell and the life to come is then related to some scenes of the universe which all people see. Thus the *sūrah* combines the inspiration of these scenes with the feelings aroused by the earlier warnings: "*No! By the moon! By the night when it departs, and the shining dawn! It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind, to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind.*" (Verses 32–37)

The *sūrah* shows the respective positions of the unbelievers and the righteous. The unbelievers will make a long confession explaining the reasons why they deserved their fate on that day of reckoning and requital. This is followed by a final word about them, when no word of intercession on their behalf will be of any use: "*Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought, except for those on the right hand. They will be in gardens, and will ask about the guilty ones: 'What brought you into the scorching fire?' They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, neither did we feed the needy; but we indulged with others in vain talk, and we denied the Day of Judgement until there came upon us that which is certain.' So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors.*" (Verses 38–48)

Having painted this image of their position of humiliation and shameful confession, the *sūrah* wonders at the unbelievers' attitude to the call that seeks to remind them of the way to save themselves. It paints a sarcastic picture that invites ridicule at their wild resistance: "*What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition like terrified asses fleeing from a lion?*" (Verses 49–51) It exposes their arrogance, which is the true reason for their obstinate rejection of every caring advice: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) They are so envious of the Prophet, thinking that they were more deserving of being given the divine message. There is, however, another deep reason: "*No! They do not fear the life to come.*" (Verse 53)

Finally, the *sūrah* makes a categorical statement that leaves no room for favours for anyone: "*No! This is indeed an admonition. Let him who will, take heed.*" (Verses 54–55) All is left up to God's will: "*They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness.*" (Verse 56)

The *sūrah* represents a stage of the hard fought struggle in which the Qur'ān is in combat with *jāhiliyyah* and its ingrained notions and concepts. It was also combating headstrong and deliberate rejection using diverse methods. There are many similarities of approach between this *sūrah* and *Sūrahs* 73 and 68, which suggests that all three were revealed within the same period, dealing with similar situations. The only exception, of course, is the second part of *Sūrah* 73, which as we have seen deals with something different.

The present *sūrah* is characterized by short verses and a fast flow. Its verses have a variety of endings and rhymes. Its beat moves slowly at times, but is very fast at others, particularly when it describes the individual who comes in for criticism, or when it paints the image of hell's scorching fire. This variation of tone, beat, rhyme, images and scenery gives the *sūrah* a distinctive ambience, particularly as it picks up a rhyme that has already been used and changed, or when the rhyme changes in the same section to deliver an intended surprise. We will now look at the *sūrah* in detail.

Al-Muddaththir
(Wrapped in Cloak)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

You, wrapped in your cloak, (1)

يَا أَيُّهَا الْمُدَّثِّرُ ﴿١﴾

arise and give warning. (2)

قُمْ فَأَنذِرْ ﴿٢﴾

Glorify your Lord's greatness; (3)

وَرَبَّكَ فَكَبِّرْ ﴿٣﴾

clean your garments; (4)

وَثِيَابَكَ فَطَهِّرْ ﴿٤﴾

stay away from all filth; (5)

وَالرُّجْزَ فَاهْجُرْ ﴿٥﴾

do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; (6)

وَلَا تَمْنُن تَسْتَكْثِرُ ﴿٦﴾

but to your Lord turn in patience. (7)

وَلِرَبِّكَ فَاصْبِرْ ﴿٧﴾

When the trumpet is sounded (8)

فَإِذَا نُقِرَ فِي النَّاقُورِ ﴿٨﴾

that will be a day of anguish, (9)

فَذَٰلِكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَوْمٌ عَسِيرٌ ﴿٩﴾

far from easy for the unbelievers. (10)

عَلَى ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ غَيْرُ يَسِيرٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Leave to me the one I created alone, (11)

ذَرْنِى وَمَنْ خَلَقْتُ وَحِيدًا ﴿١١﴾

to whom I have granted vast wealth, (12)

وَجَعَلْتُ لَهُۥ مَالًا مَّمْدُودًا ﴿١٢﴾

and sons by his side, (13)

وَبَنِينَ شُهُودًا ﴿١٣﴾

making life smooth and easy for him; (14)

وَمَهَّدتُّ لَهُۥ تَمْهِيدًا ﴿١٤﴾

yet he greedily desires that I give him more. (15)

ثُمَّ يَطْمَعُ أَنْ أَزِيدَ ﴿١٥﴾

No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. (16)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ لِـَٔايَٰتِنَا عَنِيدًا ﴿١٦﴾

I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb! (17)

سَأُرْهِقُهُۥ صَعُودًا ﴿١٧﴾

He thought and he schemed. (18)

إِنَّهُۥ فَكَّرَ وَقَدَّرَ ﴿١٨﴾

Damn him, how he schemed! (19)

فَقُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ ﴿١٩﴾

Again, damn him, how he schemed! (20)

ثُمَّ قُتِلَ كَيْفَ قَدَّرَ ﴿٢٠﴾

He looked around, (21)

ثُمَّ نَظَرَ ﴿٢١﴾

then he frowned and glared, (22)

ثُمَّ عَبَسَ وَبَسَرَ ﴿٢٢﴾

then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, (23)

ثُمَّ أَدْبَرَ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ ﴿٢٣﴾

and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! (24)

فَقَالَ إِنْ هَٰذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ يُؤْثَرُ ﴿٢٤﴾

This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' (25)

إِنْ هَٰذَا إِلَّا قَوْلُ الْبَشَرِ ﴿٢٥﴾

I will cast him into the scorching fire. (26)

سَأُصْلِيهِ سَقَرَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! (27)

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا سَقَرُ ﴿٢٧﴾

It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; (28)

لَا تُبْقِي وَلَا تَذَرُ ﴿٢٨﴾

it appears before mankind, (29)

لَوَّاحَةٌ لِّلْبَشَرِ ﴿٢٩﴾

guarded by nineteen. (30)

عَلَيْهَا تِسْعَةَ عَشَرَ ﴿٣٠﴾

We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test

وَمَا جَعَلْنَا أَصْحَابَ النَّارِ إِلَّا مَلَائِكَةً
وَمَا جَعَلْنَا عِدَّتَهُمْ إِلَّا فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ

for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind. (31)

كَفَرُوا۟ لِيَسْتَيْقِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟
ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَيَزْدَادَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟
إِيمَٰنًا وَلَا يَرْتَابَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ
وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَلِيَقُولَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى
قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ وَٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ مَاذَآ أَرَادَ
ٱللَّهُ بِهَٰذَا مَثَلًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ
مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ
جُنُودَ رَبِّكَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَمَا هِىَ إِلَّا ذِكْرَىٰ
لِلْبَشَرِ ﴿٣١﴾

No! By the moon! (32)

كَلَّا وَٱلْقَمَرِ ﴿٣٢﴾

By the night when it departs, (33)

وَٱلَّيْلِ إِذْ أَدْبَرَ ﴿٣٣﴾

and the shining dawn! (34)

وَٱلصُّبْحِ إِذَآ أَسْفَرَ ﴿٣٤﴾

It is indeed one of the mighty things, (35)

إِنَّهَا لَإِحْدَى ٱلْكُبَرِ ﴿٣٥﴾

a warning to all mankind, (36)

نَذِيرًا لِّلْبَشَرِ ﴿٣٦﴾

to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind. (37)

لِمَن شَآءَ مِنكُمْ أَن يَتَقَدَّمَ أَوْ يَتَأَخَّرَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought, (38)

كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ ﴿٣٨﴾

except for those on the right hand. (39)

إِلَّآ أَصْحَٰبَ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٩﴾

They will be in gardens, and will ask (40)

فِى جَنَّٰتٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

about the guilty ones: (41)

عَنِ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

'What brought you into the scorching fire?' (42)

مَا سَلَكَكُمْ فِى سَقَرَ ﴿٤٢﴾

They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, (43)

قَالُوا۟ لَمْ نَكُ مِنَ ٱلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

neither did we feed the needy; (44)

وَلَمْ نَكُ نُطْعِمُ ٱلْمِسْكِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

but we indulged with others in vain talk, (45)

وَكُنَّا نَخُوضُ مَعَ ٱلْخَآئِضِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

and we denied the Day of Judgement (46)

وَكُنَّا نُكَذِّبُ بِيَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٤٦﴾

until there came upon us that which is certain.' (47)

حَتَّىٰٓ أَتَىٰنَا ٱلْيَقِينُ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors. (48)

فَمَا تَنفَعُهُمْ شَفَٰعَةُ ٱلشَّٰفِعِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition (49)	فَمَا لَهُمْ عَنِ التَّذْكِرَةِ مُعْرِضِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾
like terrified asses (50)	كَأَنَّهُمْ حُمُرٌ مُّسْتَنفِرَةٌ ﴿٥٠﴾
fleeing from a lion? (51)	فَرَّتْ مِن قَسْوَرَةٍ ﴿٥١﴾
Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him. (52)	بَلْ يُرِيدُ كُلُّ امْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَن يُؤْتَىٰ صُحُفًا مُّنَشَّرَةً ﴿٥٢﴾
No! They do not fear the life to come. (53)	كَلَّا ۖ بَل لَّا يَخَافُونَ الْآخِرَةَ ﴿٥٣﴾
No! This is indeed an admonition. (54)	كَلَّا إِنَّهُ تَذْكِرَةٌ ﴿٥٤﴾
Let him who will, take heed. (55)	فَمَن شَاءَ ذَكَرَهُ ﴿٥٥﴾
They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness. (56)	وَمَا يَذْكُرُونَ إِلَّا أَن يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ ۚ هُوَ أَهْلُ التَّقْوَىٰ وَأَهْلُ الْمَغْفِرَةِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Essential Preparations

You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning. Glorify your Lord's greatness; clean your garments; stay away from all filth; do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much; but to your Lord turn in patience. (Verses 1–7)

This is an address from on high, calling on the Prophet to get ready for his great task. He is to warn mankind, wake them up and save them from evil in this life and from the fire in the life to come, setting them on the way to salvation before it is too late. This is a hard, momentous task when assigned to an individual human being, even though he may be God's Prophet and Messenger. Mankind had, however, gone so far astray and were too steeped in sin, rebellion, arrogance and persistence. All this made advocacy of the divine faith the most difficult task to be assigned to anyone.

"*You, wrapped in your cloak, arise and give warning.*" (Verses 1–2) To give warning is the most obvious aspect of the divine message. It alerts people to the impending danger that threatens to engulf those who are oblivious of it, heading unaware into error. Such warning manifests God's grace which He bestows on people. They take away nothing of His kingdom when they go astray, and increase His kingdom by nothing when they follow His guidance. However, it is out of His grace that He gives them such care so as to save themselves from severe punishment in the life to come and to rid themselves of evil in this life. The fact that His messengers call on them to respond so as to earn His forgiveness and be admitted into His heaven is certainly a manifestation of His grace.

Having given His Messenger the instruction to warn others, He adds some directives for the Prophet to observe in his own life. The first of these is to "*Glorify your Lord's greatness.*" (Verse 3) Only your Lord is great and only He deserves to be glorified. This directive lays down an aspect of the Islamic concept of God and His oneness. Every person, every creature, every value and everything is small, while God alone is great. All entities, sizes, forces, values, events, situations, concepts and shapes dwindle into insignificance, while God alone is supreme, perfect and majestic. The Prophet is instructed to warn mankind, bearing all the difficulties of such a task, with this vision in mind. He will then think little of any force or plot aiming to impede his work, as he realizes that his Lord alone is great. Advocates of the divine message need to always keep this principle in mind when they go about fulfilling their difficult task.

The Prophet is then directed to maintain purity and cleanliness: "*Clean your garments.*" (Verse 4) In Arabic usage, this expression of cleaning one's garments means maintaining purity of heart and high moral values together with clean action. It refers to the purity of self which is covered by those garments. Such purity and cleanliness signify the condition that is best suited for receiving instructions from on high. Moreover, it is the closest thing to the nature of the Islamic message. Furthermore, it is necessary for the task of warning and delivering the message, advocating it in the midst of a multitude of forces and trends that bring with them much filth, dirt and indecency. The advocate of the divine faith needs to be perfectly clean so that he can save those who are tainted while allowing nothing to taint him. This directive shows deep understanding of the needs of those who undertake advocacy of God's faith in all types of social environment and situations.

The next directive requires the Prophet to steer away from polytheism and all that exposes people to God's punishment: "*stay away from all filth.*" (Verse 5) The Prophet stayed away from all this long before he was endowed with prophethood. His was an upright nature that disliked all deviation from the truth, and disowned all erroneous beliefs and loose morality. He never indulged in any unbecoming practice. However, this directive is a declaration of separation between two different routes that can never cross. The Arabic word *rujz*, which is translated here as 'filth', originally meant suffering or torment. It then came to signify anything that leads to it. Hence, the directive to abandon all such filth that incurs punishment and torment.

The Prophet is also directed to be self-effacing so as not to hold up what he has to exert of effort, thinking it to be much: "*Do not hold up what you give away, showing it to be much.*" (Verse 6) He was to give much, sacrifice much and put up with much hardship. Yet God wants him not to think too highly of what he has to give, feeling that it is much. To be a true advocate of the divine faith, one must not think of what one has to give or sacrifice for it. The sacrifice required is so great that no one can give it willingly unless he also forgets it, or rather does not feel it in the first place because he is so preoccupied with his duty towards God. In essence, he feels that whatever he has to give for His sake is only part of His grace and favour. Thus, giving the sacrifice and

exerting the effort are an aspect of grace God bestows on us. We should be grateful to Him for enabling us to give it in the first place, rather than holding it up, thinking we have done something great.

The last directive is to be patient: "But to your Lord turn in patience." (Verse 7) This is a directive that is given every time the Prophet is assigned a task or needs counselling. Patience is the most important prerequisite in this hard battle of advocating God's message. It is a battle against two enemies simultaneously: personal desires on the one hand, and external enemies motivated by their own desires on the other. The most effective weapon in this hard and long battle is patience for God's sake and with the aim to please Him.

When this divine directive has been given to the noble Prophet, the *sūrah* outlines the terms of the warning to be given. This is delivered in a way that alerts attention to the hard day they are warned about:

> *When the trumpet is sounded that will be a day of anguish, far from easy for the unbelievers.* (Verses 8–10)

The sounding of the trumpet is here expressed in a stronger way than normally used in other *sūrahs*. In its Arabic expression, *nuqira fin-nāqūr*, it gives a feeling of a sound that is sharper to the ear, almost beating on it. Hence, the day will be hard for the unbelievers. Its hardship is emphasized by negating all traces of ease. It is hard from start to finish, without any respite. No details are given of this hardship; it is left in general terms to impart a feeling of distress and choking. It behoves those unbelievers, then, to heed the warning before the trumpet is sounded, ushering in this very hard day.

Singled Out

This general warning gives way to the case of a particular individual who seems to have played a leading role in rejecting the divine message and plotting against it. The *sūrah* issues a crushing warning, painting an ugly image of him that invites derision. This is particularly so when his unpleasant features appear lifelike before our eyes:

> *Leave to me the one I created alone, to whom I have granted vast wealth, and sons by his side, making life smooth and easy for him; yet he greedily desires that I give him more. No! He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations. I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb! He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!' I will cast him into the scorching fire. Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like! It leaves nothing, and spares nothing; it appears before mankind, guarded by nineteen.* (Verses 11–30)

There are several reports suggesting that the person so referred to is al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah. 'Ikrimah reports: "Al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah met the Prophet who read to him a passage of the Qur'ān. It appeared as though al-Walīd softened a bit. Abū Jahl heard of this, so he went to al-Walīd and said to him: 'Uncle! Your people are raising some money for you.' He asked for what reason. Abū Jahl answered: 'They want to give it to you, because you went to Muḥammad to see what you might gain from him.' [Abū Jahl was thus playing on a most sensitive point, trying to arouse al-Walīd's pride.] Al-Walīd said: 'The Quraysh know that I am the richest among them.' Abū Jahl said: 'Then say about him something to make clear to your people that you are opposed to what he says.' Al-Walīd said: 'What shall I say. None of you has better knowledge of poetry than me. I know all about poetry including the poetry of the *jinn*. What Muḥammad says is nothing like that. What he says is indeed sweet; it towers over all speech; it rises high and nothing can top it.' Abū Jahl said: 'Your people will not be satisfied unless you say something negative about him.' Al-Walīd said: 'Then give me time to think.' When he thought it over, he said of the Qur'ān: 'This is sorcery taken from olden times.' The above passage was then revealed in reference to him.

In another report, it is said that some of the Quraysh said: 'If al-Walīd follows Muḥammad, the whole tribe will follow suit.' Abū Jahl said: 'I will take care of him.' He went to see him… The report then

mentions the above conversation between the two, and that after long thinking al-Walīd said: 'It is sorcery handed down from olden times. Do you not see how it causes divisions between a man and his family, children and servants?'

Such was the event as reported. The Qur'ān, however, describes it in its own moving way. It so starts with a fearsome threat: "*Leave to me the one I created alone.*" (Verse 11) The address is made to the Prophet. He is told to leave this person to God. He created him alone, without anything in which he now takes pride, such as wealth, children, comforts and luxuries. Yet he still seeks to possess more. God says to the Prophet to leave him to Him, for He will battle with him. Here, we can only shudder as we imagine the overwhelming power of the Almighty moving to crush this powerless individual. This shuddering is experienced by the reader and the listener who are not meant by it. How, then, about the one facing this power?

The *sūrah* describes at length this creature and what God has given him of favours, before it mentions his headstrong rejection of the truth. God created him alone, deprived of everything, naked. Then He gave him plentiful wealth, and able sons who attend to his needs and give him authority and protection. He facilitated life for him. Yet, "*he greedily desires that I give him more.*" (Verse 15) He is neither content nor grateful. Or perhaps he hopes to receive revelations and a sacred book, as mentioned towards the end of the *sūrah*: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) He did indeed envy the Prophet.

At this point he is strongly repudiated for his greed. He has not shown any gratitude to God for what He has given him.

"*No!*" The repudiating word is decisive. "*He has set himself stubbornly against Our revelations.*" (Verse 16) He deliberately set himself against all pointers to the truth and indicators of the way to true faith. He opposed the divine message and the Messenger preaching it, prevented others from listening to it and spread false rumours about it. This repudiation of the man and his attitude is followed by a threat to replace his ease with hardship: "*I will constrain him to endure a painful uphill climb.*" (Verse 17) This verse paints hardship in the movement. Going uphill is the most difficult and tiring way of walking. If the person set on such

an uphill road has no intention of so going up, but is instead being pushed, the hardship is even greater and more exhausting. At the same time, the statement expresses a reality. A person who moves away from the easy, friendly and facilitated path of faith will find himself in a hard to traverse passage that leads nowhere. He goes through life worried and distressed, as though he is rising high into the sky, or going up a rough, hard track carrying neither food nor drink, and expecting no comfort at the end.

The *sūrah* draws a sarcastic caricature of this person with grim features, frowning, thinking hard and trying to find fault with the Qur'ān. He is obsessed with trying to find an apt and negative description to label the Qur'ān with: "*He thought and he schemed. Damn him, how he schemed! Again, damn him, how he schemed! He looked around, then he frowned and glared, then he turned his back and gloried in his arrogance, and said, 'This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!'*" (Verses 18–25) The image we are given here takes us one glimpse at a time, step by step, and movement by movement. It is like watching a paint brush at work, rather than hearing words giving a meaning. More than that, it is like a scene in a film, consisting of many frames. One frame shows him thinking and scheming. This is coupled with an invocation, '*Damn him!*' and a derisive remark, '*how he schemed.*' Both invocation and derisive remark are repeated to heighten the effect. Another frame shows him looking here and there, in affected seriousness, again inviting ridicule. The next frame shows him frowning, and another shows his features grim. In both, the impression is that he is trying to concentrate, but in a laughable way. Yet, after all this labour, he comes up with nothing. He closes his eyes to the light and turns away from the truth. All he can say is: "*This is just sorcery handed down from olden times! This is nothing but the word of a mere mortal!*" (Verses 24–25)

These glimpses of such a sad individual are impressed on our minds more strongly than a painting or a film. Moreover, the man becomes the laughing stock for the rest of time. His miserable picture is raised there for all future generations to see.

Once the picture is hung in place and this miserable creature is seen by all there then comes a frightening warning: "*I will cast him into the scorching fire.*" (Verse 26) The warning is made even stronger by the

enigmatic air that surrounds the fire: "*Would that you knew what the scorching fire is like!*" (Verse 27) It is too great to be imagined! Yet another description is added to make it even more terrifying: "*It leaves nothing, and spares nothing.*" (Verse 28) It swallows everything, obliterating whoever or whatever is cast into it, leaving no trace. Moreover, it presents itself before people: "*It appears before mankind.*" (Verse 29) This echoes the verse in an earlier *sūrah*: "*It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth.*" (70: 17) It thus shows itself, deliberately striking fear into those who are destined to suffer its torment. Guards stand there: "*Guarded by nineteen.*" (Verse 30) We do not know if the number refers to individual angels who are '*stern and mighty*', as described in *Sūrah* 66, or whether it refers to rows or types of angels. This is merely a piece of information to which more will be added in the *sūrah*.

A Test for Unbelievers

The believers received God's words with the sort of acceptance worthy of one who trusts his Lord and shows the sort of manners a servant should have. They neither doubted this piece of news nor questioned it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, received it all with hearts devoid of faith or seriousness. They had no reverence of God. Hence, they made sarcastic comments, making the number, i.e. the 19, the subject of endless jokes. One of them said: 'Will not each 10 of you be sufficient to overcome one of them?' Another said: 'You take care of two of these and I will take care of the rest. You will have nothing to worry about from them.'

It was then that the next verse was revealed, explaining God's purpose behind giving this piece of information on something that belongs to the realm beyond human perception and mentioning this particular figure. It makes clear that that realm and the knowledge of all that relates to it belongs to God alone. It also mentions the ultimate end that results from the mention of the scorching fire and its guard:

> *We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire, and We have made their number a test for the unbelievers. Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the*

> *believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt; but the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?' Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. No one knows your Lord's forces except Him. This is all but a reminder for mankind.* (Verse 31)

The verse begins by mentioning the nature of the 19 guards whose number the unbelievers joked about: "*We have appointed none other than angels to guard the fire.*" (Verse 31) They belong to that species of creature the nature and strength of which are known only to God Almighty. He mentions elsewhere in the Qur'ān that the angels "*never disobey God in whatever He commands them and always do what they are bidden to do.*" (66: 6) This statement makes it clear that they always obey God's orders and that they have the power to do whatever He bids them. Since He has assigned to them the task of guarding hell, then they have been given the power to undertake this task and fulfil it as it should be done. Thus, there is no way that human beings can fight with them or subdue them. Such talk only betrays the unbelievers' crude ignorance of the nature of God's creation and how He conducts affairs.

"*We have made their number a test for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 31) It is the unbelievers that start arguing when the number is mentioned, because they cannot distinguish when an argument is out of place. Since this question belongs to the realm beyond, and mankind have no knowledge of it, then whatever God says about it should be accepted without argument. It should also be understood that mentioning this fact only, without adding further details, is the appropriate and beneficial way. To argue about it is futile, because argument can only be based on knowledge that does not fit with the information to hand. Their exact number, whatever it signifies, is determined by the One who coordinates everything in the universe and creates everything according to a specific measure. This number is like any other, and a person who wants to argue will make the same objection to any other number. Why are the heavens seven? Why was man created from dried clay, like pottery while the *jinn* were created from raging flames of fire, as mentioned in *Sūrah* 55? Why does pregnancy last nine months? Why do tortoises live for centuries?

Why this, and why that! The answer is that because the Creator who holds sway over all things has willed it so, and His will is always done! This is the final answer in such matters.

"*Thus those who have been granted revelations in the past may be convinced and the believers may grow yet more firm in their faith; and so those who have been granted revelations and the believers will entertain no doubt.*" (Verse 31) Both groups will find in the number of the guards of hell what will give some of them more certainty and give others firmer faith. The people given revelations in the past must have known something of this fact so that when they heard the Qur'ān confirming it, they were certain about it. As for the believers, whatever God says will add to their faith and make it firmer, because their hearts are open to receive facts directly, happy with every new piece of information from God. They realize that such a number serves a particular purpose in God's accurate and fine scheme of creation. Their faith thus grows firmer. This fact thus becomes more firmly established in the hearts of both groups and neither will then doubt anything that comes from God.

"*But the sick at heart and the unbelievers will ask, 'What could God mean by this image?'*" (Verse 31) The same fact leaves opposite effects on different hearts. While the people of the scriptures and the believers will have more faith as a result of mentioning the number of hell's guards, the very mention of this makes the unbelievers and hypocrites wonder about the reason for giving such an image. They neither appreciate the wisdom behind this strange matter, nor acknowledge God's absolute wisdom of creation. Besides, they are in doubt about the information given and the good purpose served by it.

"*Thus God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills.*" (Verse 31) God mentions facts and puts up signs and indicators. Different hearts receive it differently. A group will be guided to the truth by such facts, as God wills, while another will go astray, also as God wills. Everything is ultimately determined by God's will which is absolutely free. Human beings were created by God's will with a dual tendency to follow either His guidance or error. Thus, every person acts within God's will whether he follows guidance or goes astray.

When we fully appreciate the fact that God's will is absolutely free, without restriction or impediment, and that everything that occurs in

the universe ultimately reverts to His will, and when we put this in the proper perspective, we spare our minds the narrow and endless argument on what people call 'predestination'. Such argument is futile, because it looks at this question, which relates to God the Infinite, from a narrow angle, limiting it to human logic and experience.

God clearly put before us two ways: one follows His guidance and the other leads to error. He has laid down for us a method of action which will, if we implement it, ensure that we have all the guidance we need, live happily and earn His reward. He has also pointed out to us other methods which lead us into error, misery and ruin. He has not required us to know anything beyond this, and has not given us the power to know more. He tells us that His will is absolutely free and inevitable. We should, therefore, deal with understanding this within our abilities and limitations, following the way of guidance and avoiding the different ways leading into error. We must not enter into any futile argument about something that we will never be able to fathom, because it pertains to the world beyond. When we do so, we arrive at the conclusion that all the efforts theologists and philosophers put into the question of predestination, in the way they argued it, were useless, because they were the wrong efforts put into the wrong field.

We do not know what God's hidden will is concerning us, but we do know what God wants of us: namely to deserve His grace which He has committed Himself to bestow upon us. Our proper course, then, is to devote our efforts to the fulfilment of what He has required us to do, leaving His hidden will to Him alone. What will happen to us is according to His will, and we will know it when it happens, and not before. What happens will fulfil His purpose and will be according to His wisdom.

"*No one knows your Lord's forces except Him.*" (Verse 31) The nature, function and effect of these forces are all matters beyond our perception. Of these, He reveals to us what He wishes. His decision is final. No one need argue about anything God has chosen not to inform us about. Such argument is futile.

"*This is all but a reminder for mankind.*" (Verse 31) 'This' may be a reference to God's forces, or to hell and those guarding it as these are also part of God's forces. Mentioning these is meant to alert and

warn people, not to open a way for conjecture. Believing hearts will certainly benefit by such reminders, but erring ones will continue to argue endlessly.

A Look at the Universe

The *sūrah* now relates the truths of the life to come, the scorching fire of hell and God's forces to various aspects of His fine creation in the universe, which people often overlook because of long familiarity. Yet these are evident proofs of God's limitless power of creation and His perfect design of the universe:

> *No! By the moon! By the night when it departs, and the shining dawn! It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind.* (Verses 32–36)

The sight of the moon, the departing night and the shining dawn are certainly inspiring. They say much to the human heart, whispering secrets and arousing deep feelings. In its quick reference to these, the Qur'ān touches our innermost selves where feelings and secrets are settled. It is rarely the case that people contemplate the sight of the moon as it rises, travels or sets without the moon whispering some universal secret in their ears. It sometimes takes no more than to stand in the moonlight in order to feel your heart being washed, as if you were bathing in light. It is hardly possible for anyone to look carefully at the night as it starts to depart, at that time of complete serenity before sunrise, when the world starts to wake up and opens its eyes, without being profoundly affected by it. Likewise, it is hardly possible for anyone not to be alert to the scene of dawn as it breaks and begins to shine without experiencing a sense of opening up that makes us aware of a change of feeling. This change makes us ready to receive the light that shines within our hearts just as we receive the light shining over the world around us.

God, the Creator of the human heart, knows that these very sights can sometimes work wonders with this heart, as though they are recreating it. Beyond these shining feelings and openings up, the moon, the night and the dawn all refer to a great truth to which the Qur'ān alerts us.

They all point to God's power of creation, His limitless wisdom and His fine coordination of His creation.

God Almighty swears by these great universal truths in order to alert those who are oblivious to their greatness and the message they impart. He swears that the scorching fire, or its guards, or the hereafter and its events, is one of the great wonders that serve as a warning to mankind of the impending danger ahead: "*It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind.*" (Verses 35–36) The very oath, its contents and subject matter are all like hammers striking hard at people's hearts. This is in perfect harmony with the sounding of the trumpet mentioned earlier, and with the opening of the *sūrah* as it addresses the Prophet and bids him to arise and warn. The whole atmosphere is one of hard hitting, warning of an impending danger.

Individual Responsibility

The *sūrah* now declares that every soul bears responsibility for itself, leaving everyone to choose for themselves. It also states that each soul will have to account for its choices and be judged according to its deeds:

> *It is indeed one of the mighty things, a warning to all mankind, to those of you who choose to go ahead or to lag behind. Every soul is held in pledge for what it has wrought.* (Verses 35–38)

All people, every single one of them, are responsible for themselves, choosing their own positions, going ahead or lagging behind, achieving an honourable status or bringing humiliation upon themselves. Thus, every soul is tied to what it does and the action it takes. God has shown all people the way that leads to Him so that they can take that way with open eyes. As this declaration of individual responsibility is made against the backdrop of inspiring universal scenes, as well as the scene of the scorching fire that spares nothing, it has its profound effect.

It is further declared, however, that an exception is made in the case of the believers who are referred to here as the ones on the right hand. These are untied. They are also given the right to ask the guilty about what has perpetrated their fate:

> *Except for those on the right hand. They will be in gardens, and will ask about the guilty ones: 'What brought you into the scorching fire?' They will answer: 'We were not among those who prayed, neither did we feed the needy; but we indulged with others in vain talk, and we denied the Day of Judgement until there came upon us that which is certain.'* (Verses 39–47)

That the believers are thus excepted is due to God's grace, for He blesses their good deeds and multiplies them. This declaration, at this particular point, touches all hearts. It first touches the hearts of the guilty who were bent on denying the truth. They see themselves in such a humiliating position, making long confessions, while the believers, whom they looked down upon in this world, stand in a position of dignity, asking them as if they are put in a position of authority: "*What brought you into the scorching fire?*" (Verse 42) It also touches the hearts of the believers who used to be at the receiving end of much hardship from those same guilty ones. Now they see themselves in a high position while their arrogant enemies of old are placed in such humiliation. The image is so powerful that it gives both sides a feeling that it is actually taking place now, as though the life of this world has come to an end and is now a thing of the past.

The long confession by the guilty gives details of the many wrongs they have perpetrated, and for which they are led to the scorching fire. They humbly admit to these in front of the believers. "*They will answer: We were not among those who prayed.*" (Verse 43) This is a reference to faith altogether, rather than to the act of prayer. It highlights the great importance of prayer in the Islamic faith, presenting it as a symbol and proof of faith. Denying it puts a person in the ranks of the unbelievers.

"*Neither did we feed the needy.*" (Verse 44) This comes next to denying the faith. It is an act of worship in respect of His creatures, following worship dedicated to Him only. The fact that this quality is expressed so strongly in several places in the Qur'ân gives us an impression of the social environment the Qur'ân addressed. It was a hard environment where kindness to the poor was rare, despite showing great generosity when that served social interests. Such generosity did not apply in situations of real need or pure kindness.

"*But we indulged with others in vain talk.*" (Verse 45) This describes how they took faith lightly and treated it carelessly, in jest, when it was the most important matter in man's life. Indeed man should resolve this issue of faith within his own mind and heart, before he attends to any other matter in life, because it is the issue that gives him his concept of life, values and standards. It provides him with the light that shows him his way in life. How, then, can man take it other than seriously? How can he treat it as vain talk in which he indulges with similarly careless people?

"*And we denied the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 46) This is the core guilt. A person who denies the Day of Judgement will have no proper standard by which to evaluate things. All values are shaken in his mind. To him, the scope of life becomes too narrow as it dwindles into this limited space of his time on earth. He looks at the consequences of events as they are within this limited space of time and place, and he is unhappy. How can he be otherwise when he does not take the final outcome into account? Indeed, all his standards, and all matters of this life will be defective, before his evaluation of the life to come and his position there becomes faulty. Hence, he ends in utter ruin.

The guilty admit that they continued in that situation, unwilling to pray, being uncharitable to the needy, indulging in vain talk and denying the Day of Judgement, "*until there came upon us that which is certain.*" (Verse 47) What came upon them is death, which ends all doubt, bringing the final say and leaving no room for regret, repentance or the mending of one's ways.

The *sūrah* comments on their abject humiliation by raising no hope of any change in their status: "*So, of no benefit to them could be the pleas of any intercessors.*" (Verse 48) The whole thing is settled. The end of the guilty has been determined. There is no one to intercede on their behalf anyway. Assuming that such intercessors are there and willing, which is not the case, their pleas will be of no benefit to the guilty.

Who Heeds the Reminder?

The *sūrah* now puts them back in this life, where they have the chance to do something before facing such an abject outcome. Yet they turn

away, fleeing from the guidance that would bring them only what is good. The means of salvation are shown to them, but they run away from them. Therefore, the *sūrah* draws a sarcastic image of their situation:

> *What is the matter with them that they turn away from all admonition like terrified asses fleeing from a lion?* (Verses 49–51)

The scene of asses or zebras in great agitation, running in all directions as they hear a lion roaring, was well known to the Arabs. It is a scene of fast movement in a state of panic. Hence, when it is applied to humans, it invites loud laughter. This is especially so if those humans were in real fear of some impending danger. What can be said about them if such is their state, like terrified asses, only because someone is reminding them of their Lord and their eventual destiny, showing them the way to avoid such misery and pain? The image drawn is profound and effective. Those who contemplate it will be too ashamed if they find themselves in it.

Such is their external condition. The *sūrah*, however, describes their inner feelings as well: "*Every one of them demands to be given revelations unfolded before him.*" (Verse 52) It is, then, a question of envy. They begrudge the Prophet for God having given him this exceptional favour. Each one of them is so keen to attain the same status and to be given scriptures to announce to mankind. This must be a reference to their elders who felt hurt that they were bypassed when divine revelations were granted to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Hence, they said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (43: 31) God certainly knows to whom to entrust His final message. He chose for this task a great man with the noblest of hearts. This was enough to fill those unbelievers with rancour. Their unjustifiable grudges were also enough for the Qur'ān to expose.

The *sūrah* continues its presentation of their inner feelings. As it censures their envy, which lacks sound basis, the *sūrah* now gives another reason for the unbelievers' continued denial of the truth and their rejection of the message: "*No! They do not fear the life to come.*" (Verse 53) It is indeed their lack of fear of what may happen in the life to come that leads to their heedless attitude to reminders. It makes them react

illogically to the divine message. Had they genuinely felt the truth of the hereafter they would have had a totally different reaction.

The *sūrah* repudiates their attitude once more, as it puts its final word to them, leaving them to choose for themselves what they may: "*No! This is indeed an admonition. Let him who will, take heed.*" (Verses 54–55) This Qur'ān to which they refuse to listen, and from which they turn away like frightened asses, is a reminder highlighting the truth. Everyone adopts the attitude they want towards it. Whoever is willing to be reminded will have the reminder. Others choose their own way. The outcome is either heaven and the dignity it imparts or hell and the humiliation it involves. It all depends on one's own choice.

The *sūrah* concludes with a restatement of God's free will which ultimately determines all affairs. This is the truth the Qur'ān is keen to state whenever an occasion arises in order to give the believers the correct concept concerning His will, and its being absolutely free and universally applicable.

> *They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills. He is the Lord to be feared, the Lord of forgiveness.* (Verse 56)

Whatever happens in the universe is tied to God's grand will and occurs within it. It is not possible for anyone or anything to will something that is in conflict with God's will. It is His will that controls everything in the universe. It is the will that brought the universe into existence and established its rules and forces. Therefore, the universe, with all living things in it, moves within the framework of God's will that is unbound by limit or restriction.

Taking heed is something that God facilitates for everyone He knows to deserve it. When a servant of His shows that he or she has sincerity of intention, He directs them to what brings them closer to Him. No servant knows what God's will is for him, but everyone knows what God wants of them. He has explained this to them. Therefore, He helps, according to His free will, everyone who is sincere in the attempt to fulfil the duties He has assigned to them.

The Qur'ān aims to impress on every Muslim mind the dual notion that divine will is absolutely free and that it incorporates every will; this

so that we turn to it willingly and submit to it completely. This is the essential notion without which Islam cannot be firmly established in one's heart. When it is thus established, it initiates a comprehensive vision to which a Muslim resorts in all life events. This is why this principle is emphasized whenever the Qur'ān promises believers they will be in heaven, warns unbelievers against hell, and speaks of guidance and error. To take such a statement in a narrow way arguing about predestination is no more than taking a partial view of a universal truth, forcing it into a narrow vision that leads nowhere.

"*They, however, will not take heed unless God so wills.*" (Verse 56) Their will cannot be on a collision course with God's will. Indeed, they cannot move in any direction without the operation of God's will that so enables them to move. God is "*the Lord to be feared,*" by His servants. Hence, they are required to demonstrate this. He is also "*the Lord of forgiveness,*" who bestows this on His servants by His will. To fear God is to deserve forgiveness, and God is the Lord of both.

The *sūrah* concludes with this humbly felt glorification of God. It leaves us looking up to God. It leaves us hoping that He will guide us to His remembrance, so that we will always fear Him and that He will then grant us forgiveness.